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AUTHOR Smith, David H.
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ABSTRACT

Oral communication is the primary mode used by members of organizational groups to build and intercommunicate shared cultural myths and values. Verbal communication within organizational groups--businesses, church congregations, nursing teams, and the like--is the foundation of the reality shared by members of the groups. Finding the master operating symbol used in intercommunication and the reality myths communicated is a new and efficient way of analyzing organizational communication. Organizations use common symboling and members consistently express the same values and themes. Members of test organizations tended to perceive events in the same ways. Usefulness of master symbols for analysis of organizations has not yet been supported with statistical data, but intuitive examination indicates that the concept can yield new information about organizational dynamics. (CH)

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THE MASTER SYMBOL AS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATION COMMUNICATION

David H. Smith
The Ohio State University

In the March 1970 Journal of Communication A. J. M. Sykes argues that the actions of communities and groups can be explained on the basis of persistent myths that are salient to a given problem at a given time.[1] These myths serve to organize perceptions and suggest values that are applicable to the problems faced by the community. This essay reports an attempt to extend Syke's approach to the study of organizational communication.

Sykes' thesis is essentially consistent with the symbolic interaction point of view. Reality is viewed as socially constructed. Shibutani argues, for example, that the hallucination does not differ from other experiences in the nature of the sensation. It is only the absence of social validation that causes us to regard hallucinatory experience as unreal.[2] Our notions of what is real derive from our community, our social group. Communities teach us initially how to organize our percepts and give us a base against which we continually check the "accuracy" of our perceptions. Garfinkle suggests that man imputes understanding to experience from "...socially valid and institutionally recommended standards of 'preference'. With references to these standards he makes the crucial distinctions between appearances and reality, truth and falsity, triviality and importance, accident and essence, coincidence and cause".[3]

The process through which our standards for reality are acquired is that of symbolic interaction, communication. Speech, in its broadest

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sense, functions as the mechanism through which reality is constructed and modified. Berger and Luckman put it this way:

> ...the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individuals' interactions with others. Just as reality is originally internalized by a social process so it is maintained in consciousness by social processes.
>
> The most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation.
>
> At the same time that the conversational apparatus ongoingly maintains reality, it ongoingly modifies it. Items are dropped and added, weakening some sectors of what is still being taken for granted and reinforcing others. Thus the subjective reality of something that is never talked about comes to be shaky....
>
> Generally speaking, the conversational apparatus maintains rality by "Talking through" various elements of experience and allocating them a definite place in the real world.[4]

Inasmuch as men in our complex urban society lead segmented lives, they move among various social groups each of which provides its own definition of reality for the salient dimensions of experience. Thus "home" is different from "work" or "church" or "club" not simply in location but in the whole frame of assumptions through which experience is interpreted.

If we are interested particularly in human organizations we will find that an important part of the organizing process is the interpretive function. People pool their reactions to the organizational experience through conversation. Some impressions are confirmed and remembered; others are disconfirmed and forgotten. Certain ideas become so pervasive as to be shared by everyone. To be part of the organization is to share those common beliefs. Newcomers are integrated into the organization as they learn to share these fundamental notions. Thus organizations

remain much the same despite change in the people who comprise them. These shared beliefs may be viewed as expressions not just of individual percepts but of an organizational culture which transcends the individual involved and persists while organizational place holders change. Coordinated action of people engaged in organizing together stems as much, if not more, from their sharing of a common picture of reality as it does from the exchange of task oriented messages. Indeed the student of organizational communication might well find the job of describing and analyzing an organization much simpler if he were to focus on the reality picture shared by organizational members. Rather than studying messages and the channels through which they flow, the scholar might gain a more global and simpler view of the organization by determining the assumptive frame on which the creation and interpretation of messages is based. The product of such a study would be a summary of the shared beliefs of organizational members. This summary would explain the nature of the organization, mirror its strengths and point up its problems.

Such a summary might be like the explanations offered by Sykes who argues that reality pictures are embodied in myths. He explains the rejection of a proposal for management-labor cooperation on the basis of a myth about management mistreatment of workers during the depression. The myth dramatized the basic belief that management couldn't be trusted. He explains the Irish belief about their fairness toward protestants by relating a pervasive anectdote about the suicide of an Anglican priest which an Irish coroner's jury ruled accidental death.

These explanations are simple and easy to grasp yet they are powerful in their explanatory scope. They do not require speculation

about the state of mediating processes of group members. No attitude scales need be constructed. The myths are related and celebrated in the discourse itself. The motives for action and the basis for the interpretation of experience are found within the mythological statements. Joseph Royce explains a mythological statement this way:

> "When men pool their existentially valid findings and project them out into the universe and ask the ultimate questions of life, when they in effect try to encompass the totality of things, they are in my opinion, offering a mythological statement concerning the nature of reality and it is my view that the best they can muster is an image of this totality - a reality image or myth."[5]

If we are engaged in the task of explaining the essential nature of an organization and/or predicting the likely future reactions of the organization a useful research strategy may be to discover those mythological statements frequently used by organization members in interpreting organizational events.

In an attempt to assess the usefulness of such an approach an exploratory field study of four organizations was undertaken. The organizations were selected so as to provide a variety of sizes, structures, and types. Organization A is a family owned office supply firm located in a major city and employing about sixty persons. Organization B is a small suburban religious congregation of a denomination known for its emphasis on individual freedom from dogma and ritual. The congregation has neither a church building nor a minister. Organization C is a technical group in an electronics division of a large national corporation. The group is only several years old. Organization D is a nursing station of a large teaching hospital.

The study was designed to determine:

1. If myth-like statements could be identified in the discourse generated by organization members

2. If such statements would be similar for different individuals within the organization

3. If such statements could provide a useful description of the organization

Two means of proceeding seemed possible:

1. Recording and analyzing the informal conversations and bull sessions that occur in the ongoing life of the organization.

2. Interviewing individuals within the organization in the attempt to elicit myth-like statements.

The latter alternative was chosen because it required less researcher time and did not depend on finding an unobstrusive means of observation.

Permission to interview was obtained from organizational supervisors in each instance. Agreement was reached that a report of the study would be available to all those interviewed and that interviewee anonymity would be protected. A memo was sent out by the supervisors explaining the study in each organization. In organization B the interviewer explained the study at a regular Sunday morning meeting. Interviews were conducted in private rooms on the premises of organizations A, C and D. Interviews were scheduled in the homes of congregation members of organization B.

An attempt at saturation sampling was made. In organization A all persons in marketing and administrative operations, about 30 people were interviewed. In organization B an adult member of each family except one was interviewed, about 25 interviews. In organization C all division

employees based in the headquarters city, 30 of 33 division employees, were interviewed. In organization D the regular daytime nursing staff was interviewed, about 35 persons.

Four different interviewers participated in the study each conducting all the interviews in one organization. The interviewers met with each other and the project supervisor frequently to discuss interviewing techniques, and problems or progress in their efforts. These discussions were aimed at insuring similarity in procedures among the four interviewers. At the same time, however, the nature of the interviews demanded that each interviewer be free to follow the flow of examples presented by the interviewee. The use of a structured interview schedule was rejected in favor of a much less directive approach.

Interviews began with rather general open ended questions designed to elicit abstract judgments from the interviewee. Questions such as "What kind of an organization is this?" Or "How would you characterize the kind of people who work here?" "How is this organization similar to or different from its competititors?" etc. were asked. As abstract statements were elicited the interviewer asked for specific examples or concrete instances which led the interviewee to believe the judgments expressed in the abstraction. Mirroring and general positive reinforcement were used to keep the interviewee talking as much as possible throughout the interview. Occasional questions were used by the interviewer to direct the attention of the interviewee into particular aspects of the organization to which he had not addressed himself, e.g. "What are the supervisors like?" When it became apparent after three or four interviews in each organization that certain topics

were being mentioned repetitively the interviewer made it a point to probe for reactions to those topics in the succeeding interviews.

The managers of the organizations studied were promised prior to the study that interviews would run about twenty to thirty minutes. In practice, however, it was impossible to terminate the interviews that briefly. Once the interviewee began to talk freely about his organization he wanted to continue to do so. In some instances for as long as two hours. The eagerness of interviewees to talk extensively may well be an indication of the effectiveness of the interview techniques.

Each interviewer took sketchy notes during the interview itself and following the interview made a more extensive summary of topics covered, and of examples given. These notes were in turn transferred to notecards, with each notecard containing only one example. When all interviews had been completed these cards were then sorted by the interviewer into groups according to predominant themes. Those cards which could not be so combined were disregarded.

The basis for analyzing the material thus generated was more literary and critical than it was empirical. We were interested not in frequency counts of particular acts but in the presence of over-arching themes or metaphors. A pilot study in another corporate division had led us to believe that we might find the organizational character described in one or two stories which would be related by almost everyone interviewed. In that pilot study we had discovered several myths similar to those reported by Sykes. In none of the organizations studied did such frequently repeated stories occur, however. But similar themes were recounted in different stories and examples. Hence the attempt was

made to examine those stories with such questions in mind as: Who are the central characters? Are they viewed as heroes, villains or in some other way? What is the direction of action? Is the mood one of triumph or failure? What are the forces against which the organization is moving? Are they perceived to be prevailing or being prevailed against? Are the values persistent or changing? What are the ultimate sanctions?

On the basis of this analysis the material gathered through the interviews was summarized in a report for each of the organizations. The interviewers described this whole process as relatively simple and easy. They characterized what they had been doing as simply reflecting back to the organization the most important perceptions reported by the organization members in the interviews.

As indicated above the study had three objectives. The first was to determine if myth-like statements could be identified in the discourse generated by organization members. To the extent that we had expected to find a few stories such as those reported by Sykes repeated by most of the people we interviewed we did not find such statements. However, we did find within each organization common symbolling. Persistent values and themes were expressed. In some cases they were related as real examples of an elaborated type. In other cases the incidents were abbreviated. In some cases they were expressed in shorthand fashion. Occasionally a single word provided a powerful symbol. In one of the organizations for example, the word "professional" was used pervasively by people in the organization. Different examples were given by different people to explain what professional meant. But the statement

"We are a highly professional group," was used over and over again. So although pervasive myth-like statements were not found we did discover what we now call "master symbols", which express important values and reality definitions, and function in a way similar to the myths which Sykes relates.

Our second objective was to determine if there was a good deal of similarity among individuals within an organization in their statement of such master symbols.

In one organization a new computer system had recently been installed by a controller hired from outside the organization. A number of examples were given by different individuals all of which characterized both the computer system and the new controller as rigid, impersonal and counter productive. Several salesmen gave examples of how much longer it took them to complete sales forms and reports because of the necessity of using new computer codes. Another related an incident in which a delivery had to be returned to the warehouse, new forms completed, the same merchandise put back on the truck and re-delivered in order to satisfy the requirements of the system. Still another recounted an instance in which the new controller had taken an order form, run into the president's office torn up the forms and screamed that the salesmen were not cooperating with the new system. One employee, who was also a scoutmaster, told the interviewer that the boys in his boy scout troop had told him that the scouts in the controller's troop regarded him as a tyrant. All these examples contain common elements which characterize both the new controller and the new computer system as villains which disrupted the old mystique of the personalized family company and which had led not to efficiency but inefficiency.

Repetition of such symbols was a criterion for inclusion in the final report. It is clear that repetition occurred. We were able to find a commonality of perception across individuals.

Our final objective was to determine whether or not such master symbols could provide a useful basis for describing an organization. The difficult question is, of course, what makes a description useful? In a carefully controlled descriptive or experimental study data can be subjected to statistical tests for the determination of statistical significance prior to the application of investigator intuition for the interpretation of the importance of the data. In those instances we feel very fairly confident that a procedure is useful if the level of statistical significance approaches that set by our usual conventions. In this instance, however, our interest in the discourse itself prevented us from providing standard scales or questionnaires which would give us comparable data and, hence, researcher intuition had to be applied much earlier in the procedure. There is no convention similar to statistical significance for the determination of usefulness in such a case. We believed our reports to be good ones, but then we had rehearsed and celebrated the perception of reality which gave importance to master symbols. We, of all people, should be expected to find them and to believe them to be important.

As one indicator of usefulness, however, we can report the reaction of the leaders in the organizations which we were studying to the reports which we supplied them. In organization A the family owned office supply firm, we had found considerable anxiety on the part of employees because they believed the traditional organizational myth

that the company was a customer oriented, service oriented organization with deep concern for its employees well-being, to be undermined by recent changes in company policy that had accompanied the hiring of a new controller and the introduction of computer systems in the management. The president of the company to whom we reported was aware of some of this anxiety but had not been aware that the feeling was so pervasive and so deep. On the basis of the report he attempted to deal directly with employee perceptions through a series of meetings. Inasmuch as we did not attend these meetings we cannot report on their nature or their success. We can report, however, that less than six months after our report was given to the management the firm which had been in business for a number of generations was forced to close its doors.

Organization B, the small religious congregation, had shortly before our study, been studied by its national office, using a series of Likert scales on attitudes toward the church, toward the organization and toward the community. It was the judgment of the people in the congregation that the report we gave them focusing on their master symbols was more revealing than that they received from the national church.

Similarly organization C, the division of a large national corporation had been studied by the personnel division of the corporation. Their report included a wide variety of measuring instruments designed to determine employee attitude and morale. The findings of that study were reported in a very extensive report with graphs, percentages and frequency tables. Here again the manager in charge of the division found our relatively brief report relating the master symbols we had

discovered to be more useful and give a better picture of the organization than the long report prepared by his personnel division. He told us that our report "rang true" and would be more useful to him as a basis for management decisions.

Organization D does not provide us with a similar instance of tangible usefulness. This is partly explained by the fact that although the physician in charge of the situation had agreed to have the study done, none of the physicians working there were able to find time for an interview. The report, then, focusing only on perceptions of the nursing staff was necessarily quite incomplete.

We began this study with the possibility in mind that the dynamism and success of the organization might be revealed in the nature of the master symbols related by organization members. There seems to be evidence supporting that possibility.

Both the corporate divisions studied in our pilot study and in the study summarized here were highly profitable and dynamic units. We had expected that in such units the examples related about unit leaders would be essentially heroic. We found that to be the case. The supervisors in both instances were consistently depicted in examples as more intelligent, more insightful, more capable than similar supervisors in other divisions or in other corporations. We had also expected in such successful units that examples concerning the types of other individuals in the organization would be on the whole positive. Here again this was the case. Examples in the pilot study characterized other employees as more "with it", more energetic, harder working and having a better sense of humor than similar employees in other parts of the corporation, or in other corporations. In organization C the use of the term "professional"

was tied to a number of examples which depicted organization members as highly competent, "the cream of the crop" of the talent in their field.

Organization A was undergoing a difficult and ultimately unsuccessful transition. People in that organization related incidents depicting corporate leadership in former days in heroic terms. The current company president appeared in incidents which had occurred prior to the arrival of the new controller as an intelligent professional leader concerned about the personal welfare of his employees. Incidents which were related after the arrival of the new controller, however, demonstrated instability in the image of the company president. In some cases he behaved more like a villain than a hero. In others he was depicted as under the influence of the "evil" controller.

We had believed that in organizations with problems the symbolling presented in interviews would reveal those problems. This was clearly the instance in organization A. In organization B, the religious congregation, many of the examples told about past disagreements and conflicts within the congregation. These mirrored a fairly rapid turnover in congregational membership and the considerable state of uneasiness concerning appropriate organizational structure.

There does seem reason to believe, then, that a more extensive research effort along the lines begun here would reveal consistent relationships between the nature of the master symbols used by organization members and the likely success of the organization in meeting what it considers to be criteria for effectiveness. If such relationships can be established it ought then to be possible to think in terms of

organizational intervention based upon the master symbol notion. It might well be possible to intervene to create events which would dramatize certain values. The conversations which organizational members hold with one another might well then celebrate the values thus dramatized. It may be easier to promote currently positive interpretations by careful attention to the celebrations which embody those beliefs than to introduce new beliefs or new symbols into the organization. All these issues remain for examination in further work from this perspective.

The careful listener will note that the question of the usefulness of the perspective remains largely unanswered. Testimonial evidence is easy to muster and is not usually conclusive. Speculation on future usefulness is stimulating but hardly probative. At the same time, those of us who participated in this study find ourselves describing our experiences in examples with highly optimistic themes. We celebrate our work as if it has been important in yielding a new insight. If you, in searching for a perspective for study of organizational communication become impatient, as we did, with focusing on the transmission of task oriented messages, or on attitudes toward communication in the organization, you may want to try looking for master symbols. If a number of you find that the approach changes the way you symbol about your research then it may be possible to form that basis of agreement among scholars that is in the academic community the test of usefulness for any idea.

FOOTNOTES

1. A. J. M. Sykes, "Myth in Communication", The Journal of Communication XX, 1, March 1970, pp.17-31.
2. Tomatsu Shutani, Improvised News, (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merril, Co.) 1966, pp.120-171.
3. Harold Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies" reprinted in Symbolic Interaction, Jerome Manis and Bernard Meltzer, eds., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon) 1967, p. 205.
4. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge, Garden City N.Y.; Doubleday Co.) 1966, pp.149, 153.
5. Joseph Royce The Encapsulated Man: An Interdisciplinary Essay on the Search for Meaning. (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Co. Inc.) 1964 p. 157.